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SUBJECT: COLMIL REFORMS (1) -- EDUCATION ROADMAP

Summary

¶1. Planners have drafted a "strategic roadmap" for overhauling military and police education and doctrine, the first of five reform areas announced last fall by the Defense Minister to strengthen the credibility and efficiency of the armed forces. Educational initiatives will focus on leadership and values, cross-service jointness in doctrine and training, academic standards and teaching tools, and on personnel systems. Detailed planning for these comprehensive changes will continue through 2007, with implementation in 2008 funded by the new "wealth tax." End Summary.

Education - First of Five Reforms

¶2. In October 2006, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos and Military Forces Commander General Freddy Padilla unveiled five fundamental reforms to the public forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police), as part of the 'Consolidation' plan for the next four years of President Uribe's Democratic Security policy. The five reform areas were: education and training, roles and missions, military penal justice, discretionary authorities, and intelligence. Beyond these headings, little detail on the reforms has been released; Santos has only said that they are evolving steadily. A leader of the education team, Colonel Alberto Mejia, briefed us on February 5 on the state of planning in that area. Septels will outline other reforms.

Leadership, Ethics, and Values

¶3. Ethics and human rights are at the heart of education reform plans, which COL Mejia's team have summarized in a roadmap of 19 strategies. The overriding goal, stresses Mejia, is to strengthen the "legitimacy" of the military. An ethic of excellence in service to the community, within all branches, is paramount. So too is inculcating an "indomitable spirit, in both public and private, every hour of every day." To support these priorities, the Embassy is assisting the Ministry in preparing a seminar for 200 generals on ethical processes, values, and systems. Minister Santos has said the goal is to guide service members in making their own rational ethical choices, rather than relying on rigid traditional religious standards.

----- Doctrine and Jointness -----

¶4. Going to the core of armed forces operations, educational reforms will revamp doctrine with an emphasis on shared standard operating procedures (SOPs) and joint operations. Currently, for example, services lack common communication protocols; when a rural police post was attacked there were delays in conveying where to target aerial bombardment. Planners envision the creation of a joint center for formulation of doctrine, emulating the U.S. military's process (e.g. with war-gaming simulation software). Education will attempt to dissolve distrust between services, particularly Army and Police. Mejia admits that this is a major hurdle, culturally and operationally. One means is shared training in overlapping skills -- e.g. a common sniper school, and shared human rights training. Currently, an Army officer's first substantive encounter with members of other branches can occur as late as 17 years into a career, at the war college; joint training earlier on could improve cohesion simply through interaction with other services.

----- Academics and Technology -----

¶5. The Ministry of Education will help prepare new rigorous academic programs with accreditation regimes equal to civilian universities, particularly in areas of Colombian military expertise such as Navy oceanography. The Bogota chapter of the Harvard / MIT Club is helping to target critical skill areas (e.g. health management) for educational exchange programs. Finally, planners aim to establish a system of science, technology, and innovation, including simulations.

----- Personnel Management -----

¶6. The armed forces desperately need defined career tracks and personnel databases, spanning from recruitment to retirement. The selection process for new recruits will be reviewed, with an eye to weeding out candidates with backgrounds not appropriate for military service. Career paths will be managed according to skills and competencies. While U.S. military personnel have major and minor specializations, in Colombia existing skills (e.g. in intelligence) are often ignored in the face of unrelated urgent needs (e.g. for an explosives officer), wasting training. Moreover, additional flexibility will be introduced to enable conversion from NCO to officer corps, to address the acute number of unfilled officer positions. Mejia noted that rationalizing career paths this way will require formal legislative approval of the finalized plan.

----- Planning Process and Timeline -----

¶7. Given the wide scope of the education and doctrine reform plan, 2007 will be dedicated to detailed planning. Implementation is slated for 2008, supported by funding from the new "wealth tax." The pro forma budget calls for five million dollars, although planners are hopeful for an increase. Thus far, assisted by external private consultants, the Ministry has defined its "roadmap" of priorities. The next step is to define performance measures for every strategy. Ultimately, over the course of this year, a work plan will be drafted for each of the 19 strategies and each of the services (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police). President Uribe has given full authority to Defense Minister Santos to develop the reforms, requiring presidential involvement only for the legislative changes mentioned above.

